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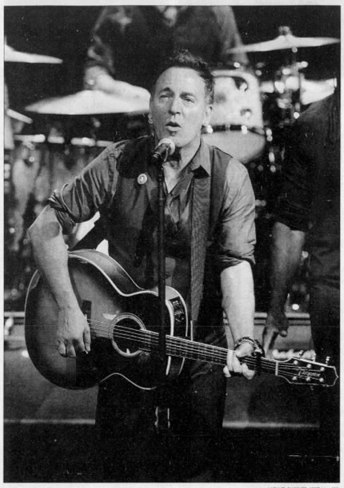
Beyond the myth of Bruce Springsteen

PEEL BACK ALL THE SINCERITY, and there is little in the way of substance when it comes to The Boss and his latest album

JUAN **RODRIGUEZ**
on Rock 'n' Roll

"Edgy is an overused word in the rock-critic realm, but Bruce has no edge."



MICHAEL BUCKNER GETTY IMAGES

It just so happens that Bruce Springsteen was not born to run, because he has continually received a free ride from the rock critic establishment that virtually created him in the 1970s.

Get on up, Brucie's got a brand new bag – protest songs! Springsteen has tapped into the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon. The proof is the pudding he serves up in his new album, Wrecking Ball, larded with socio-political comment.

Wrecking Ball is one of his most fully produced albums ever – guitars and synths and even strings (a Big Sound for a Big Message) – so good liberals can have their cake and eat it, too. (Dude, rock on!) Yet, there's something wrong with his Etch A Sketch: the people he's ostensibly "raging" at – the banker class, and all those other Bosses – are among his biggest admirers, who enjoy a big rocking sound as much as anybody. The album reminds you of those thrilling days of 1984 when you could be a fan of newly muscular, dual-headed saviour Bruce – as well as Rambo!

He's fed up with the economic mess we've been staggering through, and he's not going to take it anymore. Bruce-the-amateur-political-scientist blames the rich-poor dichotomy – actually as old as the hills – on "the Carter recession of the late '70s." (Ah, can we ever get enough of Carter bashing?) His mealy mouthed earnestness reveals zilch in the personality department, a voice that does nothing with syllables, vowels, consonants. Instead he flogs you with Sincerity; he is the Liberace of humility, the ersatz slave to rock 'n' roll.

He sold out from Day One – before selling out was cool! Two Sundays ago, The New York Times ran a full-page ad for a special concert event at the famed black-music palace, the Apollo Theater, celebrating a decade of SiriusXM satellite radio, through its E Street Radio channel (Bruce Springsteen 24/7). Turn the page and there's a full-page discussion of Wrecking Ball from The Times' two main pop critics, Jon Pareles and Jon Caramanica, under the semi-ironic headline, More Fanfares for Those Common Men. Pareles kind of likes the album, Caramanica sort of doesn't.

At least there was some debate – nearly four decades late – on his merits. It just so happens that Springsteen was not born to run, because he has continually received a free ride from the rock critic establishment that virtually created him in the '70s.

Rock critics didn't exist when the Beatles and English Invasion stormed America – indeed, the Beatles and cohorts were fodder for teen magazines and Life – but once the young critics got rolling, they developed a craving for discovering, or having a hand in the success of, future stars. Springsteen is the archetypal figure in this convoluted process.

Here's how it went down: In 1975 Rolling Stone critic Jon Landau declared: "I have seen the future of rock 'n' roll and his name is Bruce Springsteen." Then Landau wound up producing the blockbuster album Born to Run. (Nice work if you can get it.) Time and Newsweek, ever eager to expand their demographic, quickly chimed in with cover stories – the same week! Fellow scribe Dave Marsh, who was living with Springsteen's publicist Barbara Carr, wound up penning two potboilers on The Boss.

The substance of Springsteen paled next to the instant mythology whipped up around him – fast-food iconography (Bruce as the Next Dylan). The Great White Hype was not nearly as tricky or sly or slippery or mysterious as Dylan. No, nobody could possibly peg Springsteen as a literary gamesman, nobody could accuse him of putting us on – just Bruce the all-American, safe as apple pie. You didn't need any imagination to figure out who he was.

Rarely would you read a bad review of him (although if you check the Gazette critique of his 1977 Montreal debut at Place des Arts, by yours truly – well, enough self-aggrandizement).

Edgy is an overused word in the rock-critic realm, but Bruce has no edge. He may work up a sweat in performance, but his audience doesn't need to. There's nothing disturbing about The Boss. One of his most popular chestnuts, the plaintive My Hometown, is nothing but an alt-culture Hallmark greeting card.

Springsteen seldom deals in specifics, rather, he indulges in caricature, like "The banker grows fat/ Working man grows thin."

Caramanica says that his lyrics "feel more crudely drawn than 1970s Saturday morning cartoon villains ... He's picking obvious targets, painting them with wide brushes, then taking cannon shots that can't miss ... My feeling is that since The Rising, his skepticism and grand-scale empathy have ceded some space to make room for hubris, smugness and chest thumping ... If you believe We Are Alive, then striking 1877 Maryland railroad workers rest alongside Birmingham civil rights agitators and also next to Mexican border-crossers. One cause at a time, please. And when Springsteen intones, 'I'll mow your lawn, clean the leaves out your drain,' the sodden workingman empathy literally made me nauseous."

The first major American critic to rail against the essence of Bru-u-u-ce was Richard Meltzer in SPIN magazine, November 1985 (still in the glow of Born in the U.S.A.), in a special pay-homage-to-Bruce issue. The screed was titled Bruce's Transparent Dogshit and, although it raised eyebrows and hackles, it was nevertheless included in the 2010 anthology SPIN Greatest Hits: 25 Years of Heretics, Heroes and the New Rock 'n' Roll. (Guess who the heretic is: The author's introduction to the piece, the shortest one in the book, was simply, "Deconstructing Springsteen. Lousy gig but someone has got to do it. Done!")

Meltzer begins by identifying Bruce as the "youth-demographic Wayne Newton/Bette Midler." Then: "I've rarely been able to even look at the boring little prick without muttering expressions like 'master of ersatz,' 'the absolute voice of the status quo' or 'the emperor's new jeans and workshirt.' Pompous as knee jerk responses go, maybe, but here's this guy, see, the absolute non-irony of whose most prevalent guise ('earnestness') has always struck me, on sheer scale alone, as more than a trifle pompous incarnate." As for Springsteen's search for the "real" America, as evidenced yet again in We Take Care of Our Own, Meltzer harrumphs, "Is there anything grimmer and greyer than the Myth of America? I am sick of the Myth of America." (He finishes his screed: "Next we'll be asked to write about Garfield the Cat.")

The requisite Rolling Stone interview coincides with Wrecking Ball's release. Interviewed by the adoring fellow Jersey boy Jon Stewart, it's long-winded, sanctimonious and surprisingly self-righteous. Asked to react to a Times critic's view that We Take Care of Our Own is "jingoistic," Bruce snaps, "Whoever said that, they need a smarter pop writer." (A more gracious response would've been "everybody's entitled to their own opinion.")

Concerning his mission in songcraft, he is amazingly presumptuous. He seeks to "broaden people's perspective, broaden people's vision and assist people in seeing through to, for lack of a better word, the inner reality of things."

Oh, so that's what he does.

Springsteen says he was stuck for an ending that would tie things up: "How do you turn this into something that provides both clarity and inspiration? Because that, along with fun and entertainment, is what I think my job is." (Hey, good to know!) So he scavenged around his archives and discovered Land of Dreams, written as "the current manifesto" for the E Street Band's 1998 tour. "In other words, we have stood for these things in the past." In the interview he says this more than twice, just so you know he's the real deal.

The same issue of Rolling Stone contains a delightful photo of Chuck Berry flanked by Leonard Cohen and Keith Richards at an awards ceremony. Three aged all-time greats in full smile. Now, that's a bona fide reality sandwich.

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BROWNSTEIN James is bringing back the skin, and the sin, to Montreal

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ANDREA HAUSSMAN

Scarlett James heads to Las Vegas in June to participate in the Queen of the Burlesque competition.

"I wanted to bring a certain Indiana Jones-like quality to it, a journey to find the spirit of the jungle," says James. "But instead of going into the jungle, we will be bringing the jungle to patrons."

What, like having the performers swinging from vines and jumping off trees? "Almost," says James, who is the producer, promoter, choreographer and star of the revue. "And we will have a Tarzan and a Snake Woman, who is actually a contortionist. But there will be no snakes."

"But there will still be lots of slithering, slippery things in the show," promises Castelli.

Doesn't sound quite Lily St. Cyr-ish. "Not this time. We have lots of Lili plans for the future," says James, in reference to the matron saint of burlesque, a fixture and major attraction to the Sin City that was Montreal of yore. "This city's burlesque past is great, but we also have to keep our shows fresh." And by fresh, James means in every aspect of the word.

Oddly enough, for a city with such deep burlesque roots, it has only been in the last decade or so that it has made a comeback, not just with James but with a slew of others like Miss Sugarpuss, Velma Candyass and the Dead Doll Dancers, the Blue Light Burlesque troupe and Seska Lee's Acme Burlesque.

"When I started out, reaction from a lot of people was that they didn't want to know about striptease," James says. "But now it's so much on the radar. My goal is to keep it going, to bring back the glamour of Montreal's golden days, the Sin City, but without the sin. Because striptease is not a sin any more."

"What's wrong with a little sin?" a seemingly baffled Castelli asks.

On that note, James wants Burlesque Show patrons to be aware that while she and her performers peel, there is no full nudity. Private parts are duly covered.

"It's the journey and the sensuality that matter most, and that can be achieved without full nudity. That's where the talent really lies. Anybody can take off their clothes. There's no great art there," claims James, who with historian Michel Grondin penned the book Burlesque: The True Art of Seduction.

James was born in Ste. Agathe, but moved to France with her family when she was a toddler. Like her mother and grandfather, she initially set her sights on becoming a portrait painter – which she still does on occasion.

When she was 20, she left France for Montreal and worked a series of small jobs, before having an "epiphany" five years ago. Friends took her to her first burlesque show. She was blown away by it all – the dancing, choreography and costuming. She later soaked up everything she could in books and film, before working up the courage to try striptease herself and, soon after, launch her annual festival and show.

James is also taking her act on the road. She will be the star attraction at the April 15 closing bash of the Shanghai Grand Prix. She will be performing her famed champagne glass routine, wherein she peels in a giant and filled vessel.

Doubtless, Mao will be turning over in his grave. "Probably twice," she says with a wink.

The glass will contain a mix of champagne and water. If it were all champagne, it would be a fortune, considering it would require 25 bottles of bubbly to fill the glass to her specifications.

"Dom Pérignon is a sponsor of the event, so maybe they could be persuaded. I personally prefer soaking in champagne. It actually makes the skin softer."

James heads to Vegas in June to take part in a Queen of Burlesque competition. She is the only Montrealer among the 20 finalists, from a field of 250 bidding for the crown.

Next year, James hopes to strut her stuff on a tour throughout Quebec. "Then the world," she beams. "I think we're both ready."

Just as long as there aren't any glitches. Last year, James had a bathtub malfunction. In the midst of stripping, the tub sprung a leak, with water pouring out everywhere and coming dangerously close to the electric circuit board.

James continued peeling while Castelli frantically mopped. "It was a hair-raising experience," Castelli recalls. "Really, my hair was standing on edge. I came so close to getting fried on stage that night."

Adds James: "All I can say is that I was thankful that my glue sticks really well to my pasties, because, although I didn't miss a beat, I was really sweating."

Le Grand Burlesque Show takes place Thursday to Saturday at 8 p.m. at Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd. Tickets are $55; premium tickets, $80, including a bottle of sparkling wine per table; VIP tickets, $126, including a bottle of champagne per table. Call 514-286-1010 or go to grandburlesqueshow.com

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